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ABSTRACT

The theme of the Fall 1974 conference of the Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers was "Foreign Languages and the Changing Curriculum." The 250 teachers who attended were given a questionnaire aimed at identifying needs and areas of concern to foreign language teachers. They were asked to: (1) identify the most serious problems facing the foreign language teaching profession, and (2) suggest an approach that would most improve foreign language instruction. A need for community support for foreign language learning ranked as the biggest concern. Student motivation ranked as the second most crucial problem. Lack of understanding and support from the administration, inadequate budgets, declining enrollments and inadequate teacher preparation were also cited. Solutions to problems centered on curricular reform, including goal re-evaluation, alternative organization and changes in content. Public relations were also seen as a means of change, with efforts to reach administrators and school counselors, parents, the community, the state and the nation. A follow-up, closed questionnaire was submitted to participants at the spring conference. This questionnaire listed problems and solutions based on those most often mentioned on the earlier questionnaire, and asked that they be ranked on a five-point scale. Decreasing enrollments and excessive utilitarian emphasis in the curriculum ranked high, and again public relations emerged as the best solution. (CHK)

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A NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS TODAY

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In the fall of 1974, the Wisconsin Association of Foreign Language Teachers chose as its conference theme, "Foreign Languages and the Changing Curriculum: A Time for Reassessment." 250 teachers participated in the conference, held in the central region of the state. These teachers had varied backgrounds in the length of their teaching experience, the level they taught, and the size of their school's population (see Table I). All languages taught in the state were represented. Thus, the participants seemed to offer a representative sampling of the foreign language teachers and programs in the state.

In addition to attending a variety of interest sessions and language meetings, the teachers were asked to fill out a questionnaire aimed at identifying needs and areas of concern to foreign language teachers. They were told that the goals of the questionnaire were to identify major problems confronting foreign language teachers and to gather suggestions for solving those problems. To that end, two open-ended questions were asked of all participants:

One: "What do you see as the single most serious problem facing the foreign language teaching profession today? Please select only one problem. (Think of a problem, which, if it were solved, would--in your opinion--bring the greatest improvement to the profession.)"

Two: "What most needs to be done? In view of conditions now and in the foreseeable future, describe one approach (or one area of change) which would most improve foreign language instruction."

The problems identified through question one are listed in Table II. A need for community support ranked as the biggest concern, expressed in statements such as: "The main problem is the apathy of Americans to the need for learning a foreign language and seeing its usefulness in being able to communicate with other peoples of the world. Too many feel we Americans are the most important people and all other cultures and people ought to learn our language and our ways." Many teachers felt that the community did not support foreign languages either because of their isolationist views ("We need to convince the American public, especially school administrators, that we must end our stance of linguistic isolation") or simply because they were not aware of the values in learning a second language ("It must be made clear that a foreign language teaches not only facility in expression but also--and more importantly--getting along with people who have different ideas from one's own."). Not surprisingly, teachers ranked public relations efforts highly in their suggestions for solutions to problems (see Table III).

Student motivation ranked as the second most crucial problem. Like the community, students appear isolationist, disinterested and apathetic concerning learning foreign languages. One teacher considered the most serious problem to be "our country's isolationist attitude as far as the need to learn a foreign language. Students feel they don't need to know other people's language now to communicate with them." Lack of interest and apathy concerning foreign languages were also noted by teachers: "The one great problem facing us is the idea, 'Why should we learn a foreign language when everyone speaks English?' Students often feel it is useless to learn about other people and cultures when our culture is the best and has spread world wide."

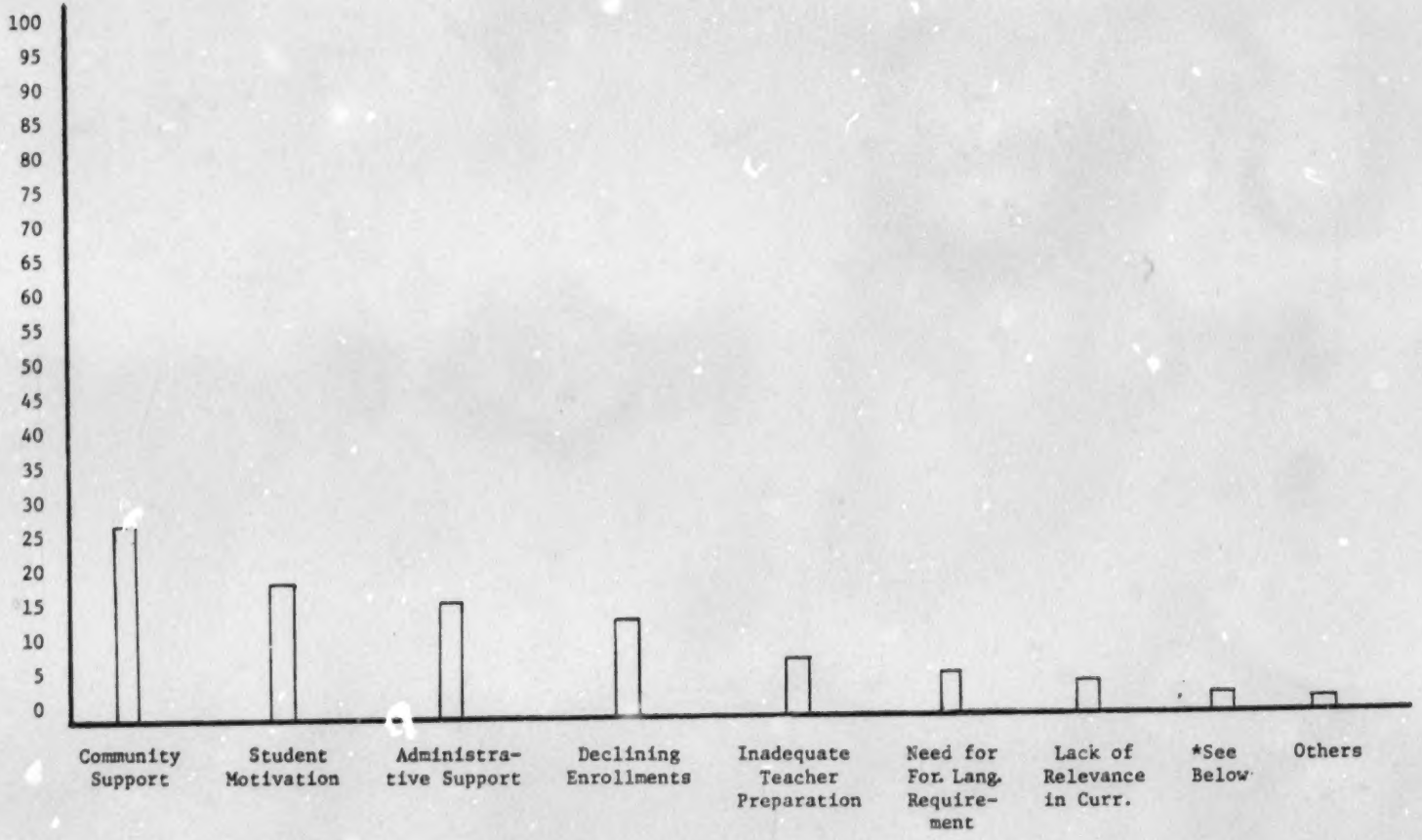
Lack of understanding and support from the administration was often cited by teachers. "There is a lack of understanding on the part of both administrators and parents that foreign language study is useful, practical, decidedly not only for the 'fine arts' students...Because of this lack of understanding, the budget of the foreign language program is the first to go." Statements were made that administrators do not consider foreign languages a serious course of study: "They seem to view foreign languages as a 'fun' thing to do but place little value on other diversified and valuable aspects of taking and becoming proficient in a second language." A recurring theme is summarized in the quote: "One of the biggest problems is the constant difficulty of having to fight for everything we need. We do have value but administrators and boards of education do not seem to realize our needs."

The feeling of continual struggle is also noted in the fourth ranked problem: declining enrollments. "Once teachers could stop fighting for enrollments, they could dedicate more effort to the work they are doing with their present students." Some teachers blamed declining enrollments on guidance counsellors, accusing them of "indifference and outright hostility."

Declining enrollments were also linked to the problems ranked in the succeeding categories: inadequate teacher preparation, the need for foreign language requirements in college, and lack of relevance in the curriculum. One participant called for "bringing some life into language teaching. Language teachers need to find better ways of presenting materials." Others criticized 'non-creative, stultifying teachers and methods" and "teachers who only teach as they were taught in a grammar approach." Several called for improving teacher preparation by requiring residence in the target culture prior to teaching, noting that "a teacher owes it to himself/herself and his/her students to command a thorough knowledge of the life styles of the foreign country. Otherwise, the language becomes a meaningless exercise." "Too many foreign language teachers have no idea or feeling for either the language or the culture they are teaching."

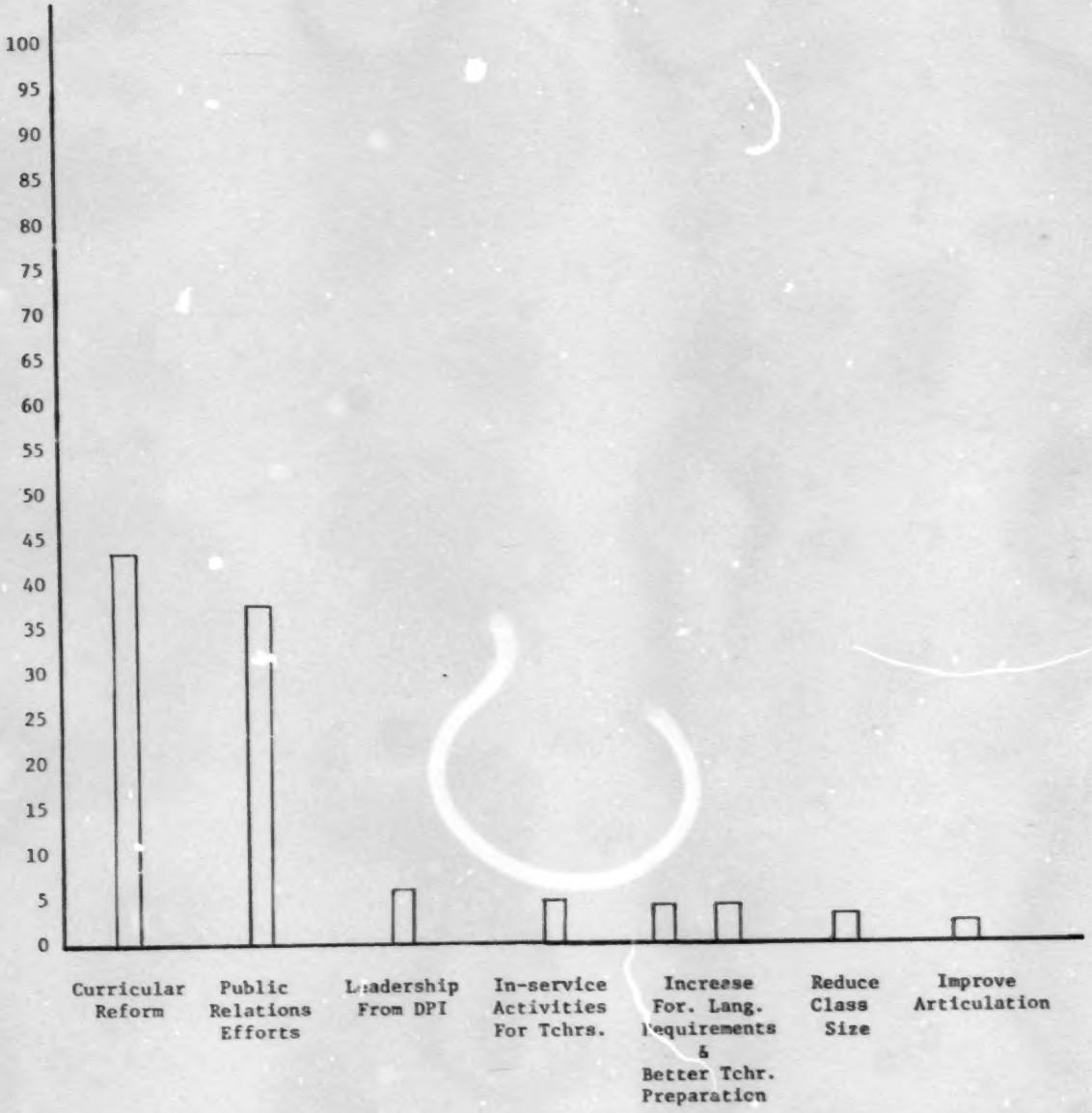
Declining foreign language requirements concerned some teachers: "Students have lost interest in taking a language because they have found they no longer need it to get into or out of college and they see no other use for it." However, others blamed declining enrollments on having had language requirements in the past: "Making the student realize that the course of study of a foreign language is more than academic, that it is a mode of communication that will benefit them throughout their lives and that a foreign language is more necessary than a qualification for college--this represents the problems that I must overcome in my system." One teacher called for a

TABLE II
PROBLEMS FACING FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAMS
(Fall Conference)



*At 2%: Lack of Articulation
Scheduling Problems
Lack of Value System & Goals in Education
Curricular Content
Excessive Utilitarian Emphasis

TABLE III
SOLUTIONS
(Fall Conference)



"philosophy of teaching so that a student wishes to take a language because he likes it, not for a requirement for college.

Lack of relevance in the curriculum was cited as a major problem and as a cause for students losing interest and dropping out of foreign language study. Some teachers felt that the general curriculum was "too practical" and "of a vocational nature" with "too great a utilitarian emphasis." Other teachers felt that foreign languages should include more career-oriented materials while still others called for taking a firm stand for humanitarian values in language learning. Both sides felt that their stands would make the curriculum more "relevant."

Solutions identified through question two are listed in Table III. Curricular reform ranked first as a means of improving foreign language programs. Specific suggestions centered on:

1. Re-evaluation of goals. "Let's work toward humanism and enrichment and move away from the emphasis on developing utilizable skills." Some teachers urged abolishing grades to remove that type of pressure and to build success into the program to give students encouragement. More exploratory experiences in learning languages were called for.

2. Alternative curriculum organization. Mini-courses (e.g., French/German/Spanish for travel; course in language for career education) were suggested as well as two tracks of language in upper-level courses, one dealing with literature and the other with the "daily life" approach.

3. Changes in content. Many teachers emphasized the importance of including more conversational work in class, working on techniques for developing "free conversation," including more student-student interaction every day, and inviting community native-speakers to class so that students would experience actual communication. Increased opportunities for practicing the language outside of class were also mentioned.

The participants urged more work and materials on culture, within the regular curriculum and in separate mini-courses ("culture" being defined as daily behavior and belief patterns). Another suggestion dealt with working on cross-cultural and cross-language approaches, with all the foreign language teachers in the school working and teaching together. Summer support or released time to develop new techniques and content were considered sine qua non of these changes.

The second-ranked solution focused on public relations efforts as a means of improving the foreign language program. Comments focused on activities to reach:

1. Administrators and school counsellors. A workshop for foreign language teachers, administrators, and counsellors was suggested, with emphasis on the operation, goals, and needs of foreign language programs, stressing that "foreign language learning is more than just a pre-requisite for college entrance or graduation." Preparing a list of information and suggestions for guidance counsellors when they help students plan programs was proposed,[1] with information and resource people sent out by the State Department of Public Instruction (which teachers described as having more "clout" with administrators and counsellors than they felt they had).

2. Parents. A need was expressed for more dialogue between teachers and parents. Informational meetings at the start of the school year and just before students choose next year's program were suggested, with the teachers orienting parents and students to the values, goals, and techniques of foreign language study. Extra-class activities, such as folk fairs, festivals, and language camps, were mentioned as a way of showing parents the achievements and activities of the language program.[2] It was felt that open channels of communications and exchange of information with parents would encourage their support of the program so that they would "speak up to the School Board at budget time" and "raise an organized fuss when foreign language study is treated with levity by an administrator."

3. The community, state, and nation. State-wide campaigns, organized by the Department of Public Instruction and state or national language organizations, were urged to promote foreign language study. Some participants suggested radio and TV spots, either "showing Americans in various embarrassing or unusual situations due to lack of comprehension or conversational abilities" or "linking our heritage to the combination of many nations and culture" or having celebrities comment on the value of learning a second language.[3] Others called for a mail campaign, regularly contacting administrators, superintendents of schools, legislators, and newspapers, concerning the "importance and down-right necessity of foreign language instruction relative to present and future U. S. involvement in world trade and world peace." Many participants cited the need for more political influence: "We need to lobby for favorable legislation for the foreign language program."

Throughout the suggestions for curricular reform and public relations effort recurred the expression of need for leadership and support from language organizations (whose numbers would command respect) and from the Department of Public Instruction and institutions of higher education (whose status and authority would influence administrators and the public). Specific suggestions centered on leadership and help from these three types of agencies to visit more schools and meet with administrators; to encourage administrators to fund attendance at national or regional meetings; and to assemble a variety of audio-visual aids and teaching units to be made available to teachers in the state. One suggestion called for a "state-wide resource center on all aspects of foreign language teaching to which a teacher could write for examination materials and teachers' evaluations of those materials." The participants repeatedly expressed the need for more workshops and organized in-service activities, "not to listen to 'experts' theorizing out for teachers to sit down and discuss specifics on how to teach something." They looked to the Department of Public Instruction, language organizations, and colleges or universities to organize, lead, and promote these activities.

Other proposed solutions included making foreign languages a requirement (even starting in elementary schools but especially in college); improving teacher preparations (by requiring study in the target culture and a five-year program in pre-service teaching plus continued supervision and training during in-service teaching); reducing class size (to 20 at beginning levels and doing away with minimum requirements in upper levels); and improving articulation (across levels and across languages, with more exchanges of visits, classes, and information among teachers).

Spring Conference

A follow-up, closed questionnaire dealing again with perceived problems and proposed solutions was submitted to participants in the spring conference of the same language organization, drawing on a similar population sampling. A list of problems facing foreign language programs and potential solutions was drawn up, based on those items in each category most often mentioned in the open-ended questionnaire from the fall meeting. The items were listed in alphabetical order and were to be ranked on a 5 point scale, with 5 indicating highest priority. The participants were also asked to select the one problem of the eleven listed that they considered THE major one facing foreign language programs today. The results of the questionnaire are listed in Tables IV and V.

When faced with a delinated list of problems to choose from the teachers ranked decreasing enrollments and decreasing foreign language requirements highest on their list of problems. This undoubtedly reflects the time of year when the questionnaire was given out: in spring, teachers are dealing with problems centering on next year's enrollment figures and the increasing or decreasing of their program. The decreasing enrollments are often blamed on fewer college requirements in language or on lack of administrative and community support (ranked second, third and fifth, respectively), as overt causes, while student motivation and the goals of the over-all curriculum (ranked fourth and sixth in problems) are often cited as underlying reasons for decreasing enrollments.

"(Excessive) Utilitarian emphasis in the over-all curriculum" was ranked highest as the one major problem facing the programs. While this was not rated highly as a single problem in the fall questionnaire, it would seem to underlie and underscore the call for curricular reform which rated highest in needed solutions in the fall. Decreasing enrollments ranked a close second as the major problem, which supports the over-all high concern about it expressed in both fall and spring questionnairs on major problem areas.

In the ranked solutions from the spring conference, public relations efforts emerged as the most highly rated solution to problems in the foreign language programs. This would seem to be linked to the decreasing enrollments, lack of administrative and community support, and student motivation, all ranked highly as problems in both the spring and fall conferences. Articulation efforts ranked second highest in solutions in the spring questionnaire: this would underscore the pre-occupation with decreasing enrollments and foreign language requirements in higher education. In-service activities and leadership from the Department of Public Instruction, higher education, and state language organizations ranked highly as solutions and would also seem to be related to the problems of decreasing enrollments. Curricular reform (listed first as a solution in the fall questionnaire) was not listed as a single item but as several specific solutions (see items 10-14 in Table V) most of these items were rated as at least probable solutions for problems facing the foreign language program.

Summary

This is just one state-wide assessment of the needs and problems of foreign language teachers today. The same items, in an open and closed questionnaire, need to be administered in more states to more foreign languages teachers to validate the findings. This would provide definite directions for national language groups such as the AAT's and ACTFL.

What these two surveys do already reveal is that, in the face of reduced language requirements and declining enrollments, foreign language teachers seem to feel threatened: they perceive administrators, the community, guidance counsellors, and even students as, at best, apathetic and disinterested in their needs and programs, and, at worst, negative and antagonistic. They express a need for guidance in curricular reform and content development.

All of this would seem to call for a national meeting of leaders in the field of foreign language education to: (1) develop a "state of the arts" in foreign language programs and foreign language education today; (2) articulate the goals and needs of foreign language teachers, for today and tomorrow, to be circulated nationally, state-wide, and locally; (3) suggest future developments in organization, content, techniques, and motivation in foreign language programs to meet the expressed needs.

National support and leadership for articulating needs, goals and future directions in foreign language education and programs are needed by today's classroom teacher.

TABLE I: Data on the conference participants -- Fall, 1974

Total attendance: 250

1. Sex: Male 80 Female 170

2. Language: Spanish 101 French 88 German 65
   Latin 13 Russian 6

3. Level taught: Senior high 133 Junior high/middle school 97
   College 29

4. Teaching experience:*

1 year	36	6 years	27
2 years	21	7 years	11
3 years	29	8 years	10
4 years	12	9 years	7
5 years	26	10 years or more	70
Total 5 years or less	124	Total 6-9 years	55

5. Size of school in which they teach:
   199-less 2
   200-499 24
   500-999 54
   1000-1499 49
   more than 1500 43

Date from the spring questionnaire: PROBLEMS

To what extent is each of the following a major problem facing foreign language programs today?
SCALE: 5--Very definitely
4--Definitely
3--Probably
2--Possibly
1--Not likely

Rank order	Problem	Average on 5 point scale
1	Decreasing enrollments	4.11
2	Decreasing foreign language enrollments in higher education	3.97
3	Lack of administrative support	3.41
4	(Excessive) utilitarian emphasis in over-all curriculum	3.33
5	Lack of community support and negative attitude toward foreign languages	3.27
6	Student motivation	3.11
7	Lack of articulation and program continuity	3.01
8	Scheduling problems	2.85
9	Lack of relevance in curriculum and materials	2.72
10	Lack of unified goals	2.39
11	Inadequate teacher preparation	2.34

From the above list, please choose the ONE problem which you consider the MAJOR problem facing foreign language programs today.

Rank order	Problem	Percentage
1	(Excessive) utilitarian emphasis	19%
2	Decreasing enrollments	18%
3	Decreasing foreign language requirements in higher education	15%
4	Lack of community support	12%
5	Student motivation	12%
6	Lack of administrative support	7%
7	Inadequate teacher preparation	5%
8	Lack of articulation	5%
9	Lack of relevance in curriculum	5%
10	Lack of unified goals	%
11	Scheduling problems	1%

Data from the spring questionnaire: SOLUTIONS

Please indicate the relative importance which you assign to the following as potential solutions to problems which exist in foreign language programs. (The same 5 point scale used concerning the problems was listed for the solutions.)

Rank order	Solutions	Average on 5 point scale
1	Public relations effort	4.07
2	Articulation	3.98
3	In-service activities to improve teacher skills	3.96

4	Improve teacher preparation	3.94
5	Require foreign languages at college/university level	3.75
6	Leadership from higher education, DPI, state organizations	3.65
7	Require foreign languages at senior high level	3.56
8	More individualized work for students	3.51
9	Class size: smaller classes needed	3.49
10	More career-oriented materials	3.45
11	Require foreign languages in middle school/elementary school	3.43
12	More cultural materials	3.14
13	More use of mini-courses	3.09
14	More exploratory courses	2.85

Footnotes

1. For specific suggestions in this area, see: Constance K. Knop, "Gaining Better Student Support for the Foreign Language Program," 95-106 in Frank M. Grittner, ed., Student Motivation and the Foreign Language Teacher: A Guide for Building the Modern Curriculum (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Co., 1974).

2. For information on folk fairs and festivals, see Gertrud Meyer, "Making the Foreign Language Program Visible to the Public: the Language Festival," 46-65 in Frank Grittner, ed., Student Motivation and the Foreign Language Teacher: A Guide for Building the Modern Curriculum (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Co., 1974).

3. Such tapes are now available for radio spots or for classroom use from: ACTFL, 62 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011. In addition, ACTFL now has a classroom materials center which is a collection of teacher-made units that have been successfully used "in the field."